

# CLAIM THE STAGE!

A Woman's Guide To  
Speaking Up, Standing Out,  
and Taking Leadership



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## [ CHAPTER 1 ]

# Why Your Voice Matters

*I have come to believe, over and over again,  
that what is most important to me must be  
spoken, made verbal, or shared, even at the  
risk of having it bruised and misunderstood.*

—AUDRE LORDE, AMERICAN POET (1934-1992)

The scene of my humiliation occurred in a chic boutique in Tel Aviv, Israel, where I was living because of my dad's job as an American Foreign Service Officer. I was thirteen years old.

My mother, Theresa, had amassed a pile of awesome back-to-school clothes for me and deposited them at the checkout counter. The young woman at the cash register was sullen and silent as she rang up our order and stuffed the clothes into a bag.

My mother, five feet, eight and a half inches tall in her stocking feet, pulled back her shoulders and snatched the bag with a flourish. Her eyes flashed in a way I knew meant trouble.

“You have given me terrible service,” she said, in a sharp, steely voice that echoed throughout the crowded store. “You didn't greet me, you didn't thank me, and you didn't look at me. But you were perfectly willing to take my money. You were downright rude. If this is how you treat your customers, you have lost my business.”

My mother grabbed my hand and pulled me with her out the boutique door. “Sometimes,” she said, “you just have to say something. Do you understand what I mean?”

Still engulfed in my fog of humiliation, I gave a noncommittal shrug. Because the truth was, I didn’t understand at all. Why couldn’t my mother have just paid for the clothing, taken the shopping bag, and left without making such a fuss in such a public place? I just didn’t get it.

Nine years passed.

Newly graduated from college, I was visiting Los Angeles, contemplating whether to move to Hollywood to pursue a career as an actress. A supposedly well-meaning relative introduced me to a colleague I’ll call Dick, who had high-level contacts in the entertainment industry.

Perching uncomfortably on a spindly chair in an airy, plant-filled, Beverly Hills living room, I listened in discomfort as my relative and his very slimy pal regaled me with stories about how they had gamed the entertainment industry to make their “fortunes,” and how they had slept with many well-connected women to gain more visibility.

They thought they were impressing me. Dick, who was old enough to be my father, looked me up and down like I was a choice piece of sirloin. He then leaned forward conspiratorially and said: “I have lots of contacts in the music and film world who can help you get where you want to go a whole lot faster. You’ve just got to be very friendly to them, if you know what I mean. So, here’s my question: If I put my reputation on the line and introduce you to them, how willing are you going to be to do whatever it takes in the name of growing your career?”

“Yeah,” my relative chimed in, “What would you be willing to *do*?”

Both Dick and my relative looked expectantly at me, smiles wide.

With flaming cheeks and a pounding heart, I lifted myself off my chair and I raised myself to my full height of six feet. Squaring my shoulders, I looked down at the two men.

“Well, I’ll tell you what I’m *not* willing to do,” I said, in a growly voice I didn’t know I had. “I’m not willing to randomly sleep with somebody in the hopes of advancing my career. And if that hurts my career, I don’t give a damn. And shame on you for even asking me.”

Their mouths clamped shut, and I sat back down among the palm fronds. I was so done with these guys.

And in that moment, I finally got why my mother spoke her piece to that cashier years before: *Sometimes you just have to say something*. And when you do, danged if it doesn’t feel good.

*Sometimes you just have to say something*.

Whether it’s delivering a critical sales pitch, expressing your value in a job interview, crushing a keynote speech at an industry event, holding a healthy boundary when you’re in a difficult conversation, or speaking up in a meeting dominated by interrupters, *sometimes you just have to say something*. Because what you know, what you think, and what you have to say matters. And your voice deserves to be heard.

As a professional presence and presentation coach, trainer, and speaker, I’ve been on a mission for almost two decades to help people, and women in particular, find the words (and the courage) to say what they need to say when they *just have to say something*.

This book is an extension of that mission. It's my hope that my words will encourage women to use their words to make the difference they were born to make.

## **You Have A Voice**

Whether it is quiet, loud, squeaky, commanding, or hesitant, you have a voice.

A voice you use to speak, to shout, to whisper.

A voice that reflects and relays your passions, your perspective, your skill sets, your talents, and your wisdom.

You have a voice. You may still be defining it, strengthening it, or claiming it, but oh, boy, do you ever have a voice!

You also have a choice: The choice to keep your voice (and thus the deliciousness, the power, the potency of your wisdom and perspective) to yourself, or to share it with the world around you.

What are you choosing to do?

Since you were led to read this book, I'm going to guess you're leaning toward the choice of sharing your voice. Which is great. But you know what's even better than leaning in? Diving in. Stepping in with both feet. Flinging your arms wide, opening your mouth even wider, and jumping in willy-nilly, hell-bent on using your voice to make your difference.

If it sounds like I'm pushing you to share your voice, you are dead right. I've written this book to nudge, prod, and shamelessly cajole you into making the choice to share your voice instead of keeping all your goodies to yourself. Why? Because if you don't express your voice, no one will hear it, and the unique wisdom, viewpoint, and

contributions only you can offer will be lost to the world, which—considering the chaotic state of the world we live in—would be more than a crying shame: It would be an unmitigated disaster.

The fact is our battered, beleaguered world needs everything you are and everything you have to offer. It needs your distinctly female wisdom, perspective, and light. It needs you to raise your voice to levels that literally and figuratively can be heard (and not ignored) on stages large and small, in corporate boardrooms, and in the hallowed halls where the political decisions that shape our lives are made.

The way I see it, too many women have been lurking in the wings for far too long. It's time to fling off our cloaks of invisibility, step boldly into the spotlight, and claim the stage.

### **A Working Definition Of Claim The Stage**

In my career I have been on stage as a working actor in New York and regional theater, in Hollywood film and television, and performing as an award-winning singer/songwriter. I have shared the stage with notables such as James Earl Jones, Mariel Hemingway, and Keanu Reeves.

For the past twenty years as a presentation coach my passion has been to help women claim the stage.

So, what exactly is meant by claim the stage?

To claim the stage means *to step fully, vigorously, intentionally, and wholeheartedly into the spotlight in order to share your gifts, wisdom, and perspective with others*. It means laying claim to your implicit right to be in the spotlight and bring your talents to bear in the moment at hand.



Actors, musicians, athletes, speakers, and politicians all claim the stage (or the arena, or the playing field) in one way or another. So do executives, business leaders, and any person who wants to share what they know and be of influence with an audience of one or many.

For the professional women I coach and train, claiming the stage can take many forms, including:

- Finding the courage to speak up and be heard more frequently and confidently in critical meetings.
- Giving an effective and impactful keynote speech at a prestigious conference.
- Asking for a raise or promotion, or interviewing for a new position, without backing off or downplaying their experience and worth.

While it's important to define what claiming the stage *is*, it's equally important to define what it *isn't*: playing small and hiding from opportunities to step up, speak up, and show up when your voice and your perspective could make a difference.

### **Women: Hardwired For Nurturing, Not Leadership**

That said, many contend it is only natural that women take a secondary position when it comes to claiming the stage. They believe that women's voices are best used to exhort others into action and leadership, and that a woman's place is in the wings, supporting others in the spotlight. They point out that women are valued and encouraged for their contributions as important members of the team, rather than leaders of the team. Their thinking is like this: You don't need to be a Supreme Court justice, you can just clerk for one.

When I reflect on this perspective, I think of my mother, Theresa. Though Ma was a gifted visual artist, she treated her art as a hobby. Instead, she focused primarily on her role as the wife of a career foreign service officer (my father, Michael). When I was growing up it was clear to me that, as my Dad's job moved us from Washington D.C. to Paris, Rome, and Israel, my mother had a job too: Helping my dad look good in his important career as a diplomat on the world stage.

Lovely, charming, the consummate hostess and conversationalist, Ma organized cocktail parties and dinners with VIPs, fretted over seating charts, and methodically helped Daddy prepare for those parties by quizzing him on the names of the wives and children of the men who would be attending these parties. Dressed to the nines, she dutifully went out on the town on my father's arm to swanky diplomatic events, always his champion.

As a child, I remember finding a book in her bedside drawer (okay, I was snooping) called something like *The Foreign Service Wife*, issued by the United States State Department and chock-full of tips and tools to help women like my mother understand social protocol as the partner of a professional diplomat. The book emphasized the importance of my mother's presence in my father's public life as his helpmate and advocate. At the time (the 1960s) it was tacitly understood that a capable, charming woman could greatly enhance a foreign service officer's career and even help positively affect the reputation of the United States of America.

In an article by the American Foreign Service Association called "Partners in the Foreign Service: Foreign Service Wives a Century Ago," a longtime diplomat named Willard Baulac is quoted as saying, "I know of no field in which a wife can be more helpful."<sup>1</sup> My mother was certainly helpful, nurturing important business

relationships that supported my father's work through her efforts as a charming, capable hostess.

Many say it's common knowledge that women's brains are hardwired to nurture and be the "person behind the person," as my mother so ably was. They explain it like this: In prehistoric times, when Joe and Josie Caveman were alive, they each had very-well-defined societal roles commensurate with their gender roles and supported by their developing brains.<sup>2</sup>

Joe Caveman, who was bigger and stronger (and, no doubt, hairier) focused on hunting and providing food and protection for Josie and the kids. His brain helped him in these tasks by boasting superior spatial skills and higher levels of testosterone, which could account for a higher level of competitiveness and confidence. Josie's job, on the other hand, was to hang around the cave and keep the kids healthy, fed, and alive.

To do that, she had to nurture functional relationships within her family and her cave community. Helping her in her mission to create those strong relational bonds were the "language centers" of her brain, built from the get-go to be stronger in girls than boys and determined to be 30 percent larger than in a man's brain. Nurturing her relationship with Joe was especially important. Because if Joe abandoned her, it would mean no more mastodon meat, and potential starvation for Josie and her children. Essentially, Joe and Josie Caveman's brains developed in ways that strengthened and supported their individual roles as both providers (aka leaders in the outside world) and nurturers (aka cave-bound supporters of leaders).

Eons later, these hardwired differences in men's and women's brains continue to influence the way they operate in the world. Which is why many people continue to believe that women's place is to nurture and be in positions of strong support, while men's place

is to step into the spotlight and lead. As a supporter of President Trump expressed during the 2020 United States presidential election when asked about the possibility of a woman leading the country, “When I think of president, I think of a man.”

### **Hold On A Sec: It’s Not Just Nature. It’s Nurture, Too.**

The people who point to research suggesting that women’s brains are simply hardwired to nurture are forgetting an important factor: socialization. Explicitly or implicitly, women have been socialized into believing that, to use a baseball metaphor, their place is in the stands rooting for the players, not on the field pitching the ball. The concept that a women’s place is in the cave, or home, as it were (as opposed to the House of Representatives or the Senate), has been neatly served up over the centuries in literature and other forms too numerous to count.

It shows up in writing, for example, as early as the seventh century B.C. in Homer’s *Odysseus*, the epic tale of the trials and tribulations its hero, King Odysseus, experienced trying to get home to his wife, Penelope, and son, Telemachus, after the Trojan War. When Penelope attempts to tell her son to stop his musician pals from playing a tune she finds depressing, Telemachus tells his mom to “go back up into your quarters, and take up your own work, the loom and the distaff... speech will be the business of men.” As Mary Beard, bestselling author and professor of classics at the University of Cambridge, writes in her book *Women and Power: A Manifesto*, this passage from Odysseus is the “...first recorded example of a man telling a woman to ‘shut up’” and to refrain from sharing her voice in public.<sup>3</sup>

More early written evidence of the notion that a woman’s place is not in the public sphere can be found in the 467 B.C. play *Seven*

*Against Thebes* by the Greek dramatist Aeschylus. “Let women stay at home and hold their peace,” he wrote.

Furthering women’s tendency to shut up, play small, and stay hidden in the shadows are the injunctions they’ve grown up with that keep them feeling uncomfortable about or unworthy of standing out and speaking up. Many women—especially those born before the 1970s, when the women’s rights movement came into roaring existence—grew up with fathers who worked and mothers who kept house and raised the children, underscoring the belief that men are leaders and women are followers.

Everywhere women turned, they were informed that their strength lay in being keepers of the emotional and relational flame. “Behind every great man is a great woman,” went a much-quoted proverb. (It has since, by the way, been updated to read “Behind every great man is a great woman rolling her eyes.”)

Now, I certainly don’t want to diminish the incredible contribution to society that women have made, and continue to make, by harnessing their hardwiring and socialization to nurture others. There is, after all, a reason why male professional football players often wave into the camera and say, “Hi, Mom!” when interviewed after the game. But I do believe that it would be downright ridiculous (not to mention a notion as antiquated as the requirement that women only wear dresses and skirts) to think we are not capable of much beyond holding families together or championing a partner’s rise to success. Evidence abounds pointing to the reality that more women than ever are showing up, speaking up, and stepping up in the greater world in positions of influence.

In many respects, we are in a golden age of women, an era where women have more opportunities than ever to share their voice,

own their power, and make their difference in the public sphere, should they so choose.

## **Women Are Claiming Their Power And Claiming The Stage**

There is no denying that more women than ever are sharing their words and wisdom in places that have not always been welcoming to them. All you have to do is look around your community, and the greater world, to find evidence of women's determination to be seen, heard, and celebrated.

For example, in the United States more women than ever are starting businesses of their own. A 2019 State of Women-Owned Businesses Report commissioned by American Express determined that the number of women-owned businesses increased 21 percent from 2015 to 2019, while all businesses increased only 9 percent. Furthermore, total employment by women-owned businesses rose 8 percent, while for all other businesses the increase was only 1.8 percent.<sup>4</sup>

## **Women Have The Potential And The Ability. But What About The Confidence?**

The women who approach me for leadership or public speaking coaching don't suffer from a lack of talent, potential, and ability—far from it. And they don't suffer from a lack of desire to be seen, heard, and respected. What they suffer from is a frustrating, sometimes crippling lack of confidence around their ability, or even their right, to step into the spotlight and into greater leadership.

It was this issue of confidence (or lack of it) expressed by so many of the women I work with that catalyzed this book. I really wanted to understand why it was that in our initial conversation so many women expressed a variant of the statement, "I want to become more confident." And I wanted to know how lack of confidence (or greater

confidence) might affect their leadership presence and ability to effectively manage spotlight moments such as presentations, difficult conversations, and job interviews.

As suggested by my proprietary research (two surveys completed by over one hundred professional women, further details of which you can find in my *Claim the Stage! Workbook*), women often express frustration at their inability to compete with the men in their organizations, and the inherent advantages (and sense of confidence) their male counterparts seemed to enjoy. As one African American woman I coached expressed to me, “I wish I could wake up every morning and feel as capable and entitled to success as the most mediocre white man must feel every day of his life.”

In my work, confidence, leadership presence, and presentation skills are all interconnected. *Practice builds confidence, confidence builds presence, and presence is power.* If you want to shine in a spotlight moment, you need to be able to build up your confidence, which will build up your presence, which will build up your ability to claim the stage. Because the more willing and able you are to bring yourself fully to a moment where people are watching and the stakes are high, the more you can be of influence.

The more people you can reach with your words, the more influence you can have. To that end, I make my coaching clients raise their right hand and swear that they will say yes to as many public speaking engagements as possible. I figure that the more women step onto the speaking platform and share their knowledge and perspective, the more accustomed audiences will become to seeing and hearing women speakers. And by that I also mean literally becoming accustomed to the sound and tone of women’s voices (which are typically higher in pitch than men, and often pejoratively defined as shrill and deemed somehow less authoritative).

As past United States presidential candidate, first lady, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrote in her book *What Happened*, “Other women will run for President, and they will be women, and they will have women’s voices. Maybe that will be less unusual by then.”<sup>5</sup>

Or as Christopher Moore, associate professor of sociology at Lakeland College, is quoted as saying in an article in *Pacific Standard* by Abigail Lambert titled “Could Hillary Clinton’s Voice Cost Her the White House?”: “I think the more people we have with feminine voices in positions of leadership, the more sounding like a leader is going to be less gendered.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Silence Is Not Necessarily Golden**

Whether you want to step onto larger stages, or share your voice more in meetings or conversations, one thing is certain: Your voice cannot be shared if you choose to silence it. As Anasuya Sengupta, an Indian author and activist penned in her poem, *Silence*, “Too many women in too many countries speak the same language—of silence.” Silence is not necessarily golden (except when your newborn finally falls asleep, or you’ve just made an important point in your presentation and want to give your audience a chance to let it sink in, or you want to honor someone by listening well before you respond). Staying silent, hovering in the wings, and watching others shine in the spotlight will not advance your cause, sell your ideas or products, or give you the opportunity to move hearts and souls toward better, more positive outcomes.

Women’s voices should indeed be heard. They have been silenced for too long. And women certainly don’t need to add to that by silencing themselves.

I will say it again, and again, and again, probably to my dying day: You are worthy of embracing who you are and sharing your unique



voice. The world needs your voice, ringing out clearly without apology. Whether you choose to share it in corporate boardrooms, in the halls of justice, or in government office, the world needs your voice. Whether you choose to share it by speaking up and out in difficult conversations, weighing in on life-changing legislation, or sharing big ideas in a business pitch or podcast, the world needs your voice.

Which, again, is why I wrote this book. And why, I assume, you are sitting there reading it.

There are seven phases of the Claim the Stage Cycle. Moving through these phases will help you find, define, and share your voice. You'll ultimately learn tools and techniques to help amp up your confidence, steady your resolve (and your nerves), and prepare you to shine in the spotlight moments that can define your life and your career.

You can claim the stage and do and say what matters when it matters. Because your voice matters. And so do you.